



**Cornell University**

**John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines**

**Document Title:** Sweating the Small Stuff

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**Course Title:** Writing Across Cultures: Underworlds and Afterlives

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## Spring 2013 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice; coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it, addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

Winning Writing Exercises and Handouts will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See [creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org) for more information about cc licensing.)

The two winning entries will receive \$350; honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, May 17. No exceptions can be made.

## Spring 2013 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

~Please Print Clearly. Do not staple. Use paper clips only.~

Instructor's name AARON ROSENBERG

Department ENGLISH Course # and title ENGL 1111 - 101 "UNDERWORLDS AND AFTERLIVES"

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the writing exercises, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the writing exercises in a web accessible archive and make them available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Donna O'Hara ([dlo1@cornell.edu](mailto:dlo1@cornell.edu)) in the knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

"SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF"

Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature



Date

5/13/13

## Sweating the Small Stuff

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When we read literature, watch films or plays, or listen to the news, we tend to pay attention to what seem like the major events and situations. The questions we ask are often about the *big picture*: “what’s the protagonist doing?”—“what’s the main idea of this article?”—“what’s the crucial action that caused something to happen?”

However, when we look for the big picture we often *overlook* seemingly unimportant elements that play a part in how we interpret texts. In this assignment, we’ll be adjusting our focus. Instead of examining large-scale issues, we’ll be highlighting ordinary or everyday objects, actions, and figures of speech. These could include familiar things like a chair or a meal—perhaps an article of clothing. You could analyze a greeting or quick exchange between minor characters, or something that happens on the fringes of a scene.

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- First, isolate something “minor” in James Joyce’s “The Dead.”
  - Next, pay close attention to how it is described. What are the linguistic cues that make this thing fade into the background? In other words, how does Joyce’s writing demonstrate that this object, action, character, etc., does not seem (at least at first glance) like a crucial part of the privileged “main story?” What is the minor thing doing by itself and for its own sake, other than merely occupying a subordinate relationship to major elements?
  - Finally, write a one-to-two-page report on the minor thing you’ve identified. Bearing in mind the questions you’ve just asked, how far can you expand your analysis in order make an argument about its role in the story?
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The goal of the assignment will be to explore the ways in which your essays do not necessarily need to be about the big picture, or cover the entirety of a text. By focusing on minor parts, you can begin to limit the scope of your arguments and also draw out interesting and unique ideas that aren’t obvious upon first reading.

## **“Sweating the Small Stuff”: Rationale**

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One of the challenges involved with writing college-level essays is learning how to narrow the scope of an argument. Students often feel that they do a disservice to the complexity of a primary source if they do not attempt to address a work in its entirety or at least provide a summary. If the source is long—like a novel or a play—this tends to compound the challenge, since a short paper can only be effective if it trains its analysis on very specific elements.

This exercise is designed to counter the tendency to write about the “big picture” by offering students a chance to write a short, low-stakes assignment on something “minor.” Students deliberately choose an aspect of the work—in this case, Joyce’s “The Dead”—which might have been overlooked upon first reading, and make an argument about its inherent significance. Often, this process leads to surprising insights and more engagement with the text in subsequent class discussions.

Besides helping students limit their arguments, the exercise has the added benefit of teaching them how to “close read” the evidence they choose to include in future essays. By concentrating on “minor” elements like word choice and figures of speech, they are required to pay close attention to details. My students are usually shocked to learn that a very brief citation can contain enough information to carry a paragraph, a page, and sometimes an entire essay. The exercise ultimately helps students develop creative, counterintuitive, and unique arguments that they care about making. Not only are students no longer summarizing a text, they are choosing to discuss aspects that aren’t obvious; that tends to make the process of writing an essay more effective *and* more rewarding.